

Service of Prayer for Christian Unity
Westminster United Presbyterian Church
Munster, Indiana
January 23, 1966
Rev. John M. Buchanan

BEHOLDING NEW THINGS
Isaiah 43: 14-21

It is never easy to see a new thing. The human mind is a connectional device that operates by establishing links between the known and that which is being learned, and something brand new cannot be linked or related to anything. Like a computer that shorts its circuits trying to assimilate a piece of information for which it is not programmed, the human mind often rejects newness of any sort. Newness is unsettling; it cannot be categorized. Newness is discomforting because it cannot be predicted. Newness is sometimes repulsive because it involves a risk and a commitment.

A commitment to a new idea, to a new nation, even a new President, does involve a certain amount of personal risk. This is so, simply because the meaning, the implications and ramifications of something new are not obvious at first. A person never knows where he will end up when he commits himself to something new, because newness indicates a course uncharted and a future unknown.

Consider, for instance, the birth of a child. What couple realizes, before the birth of its first baby, the impact that event will have on the entirety of life? Who can know ahead of time the radical transformation of all of life when two suddenly become three? What parent does not periodically find himself amazed at the quality of life actuated in him by the fact that he is a parent?

And so, newness, on a very personal level, is difficult to comprehend, difficult to anticipate, and difficult to assimilate even when it comes. And if this is true personally, it is even more significant on a broader, historical level. Generally speaking, we are very much bound to the immediacies of the present tense; we lack what the scholar would call "historical perspective". That means we don't understand the long range significance of events even as we are participating in them. We are blind to newness because we fail to grasp the significance of something new, even as we are involved in it.

There are, however, in every age, men who rise above the crowd and point out to dim eyes the meaning of contemporary events within the whole context of history. Such a man was Winston Churchill, who seemed intuitively to know the threat of Nazism; and who chronicled the war, battle by battle, not for the sake of a dry record but with the vision of one who comprehends the meaning of events while they are happening.

John F. Kennedy was another such man; one who knew, as no other President in this century knew, the historical significance of his office. He knew that the destiny of America and the fate of mankind rested on small decisions made by individual men; and everything he did, he did in the context of this fine historical sensitivity.

Such a man, also, was the prophet who wrote the passage in the 43rd Chapter of Isaiah read this afternoon. He, too, was a man who possessed the "over-view". From his position in Jerusalem, he could see the significance of events breaking forth on the horizon; and he saw his prophetic task in terms of announcing that significance.

His countrymen were captives in Babylon. More accurately, they had been captives, but after several decades their captivity evolved to a rather comfortable sojourn. They were not restricted in Babylon; they had put down roots; gradually some of them began to adopt Babylonian customs. The captivity, the temporary exile, began to take on a aura of permanence.

But the Jews in Babylon were blind to a new thing that was happening. To the North East, the Persian armies of Cyrus the Great were gathering momentum – and the Babylonian Empire was living on borrowed time. The Prophet saw in this the hand of God working to redeem his people. This is the burden of the letter he wrote to them; the letter that occupies the 40th through 55th Chapters of the Book of Isaiah; the letter that begins movingly with the words, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God", and rises to prophetic articulation in the imperative, "Behold, I am doing a new thing: now it springs forth: do you not perceive it?".

Now I'm bringing all of this to your attention because the Jews, like many people before and after them, did not see the newness that was happening. In retrospect, we look through the eyes of faith and know that God was acting to redeem and renew his covenant people. But they did not know it, until the prophet called their attention to it, and even then they probably passed him off as a pious visionary.

This transaction is important today, because we too find ourselves involved in a great new movement; a movement involving millions upon millions of men; a movement that will one day loom large in history; but a movement which we, who are now participating in it, often fail to see.

Newness is happening! Newness has happened to the people of God with a bewildering rate of speed. As a boy, and that's not very long ago – but long enough to be in the pre-ecumenical era, I was cast, in my neighborhood, in the role of a peace maker between the Shaughnessy children on our left and the Baptist Esteps on our right. The only thing the two groups ever agreed on was the fact that I was doomed. John Shaughnessy was certain that I was going to hell and apparently he had it on good authority. One day I went to Confession with him, and Frank Estep was equally as certain that I was going to hell because I had seen the evil interior of a Confessional. And my Presbyterian father dispaired that I did not have any Presbyterian friends who neither knew nor cared who was going to hell. A homely illustration – but we have come a long way. Newness has happened – and often in spite of us.

The time in the past, when such a service as this would have been completely out of the question, cannot be measured in decades or even years, but months. There are those in our day who see with the vision of a prophet; those who know that we are in the middle of something new and very important. Pope John the Twenty-third was one as is his successor. Bishop Pike and Eugene Carson Blake are two more – prophetic voices, speaking and acting as if newness is already here, and yet all too frequently, speaking and acting to a people blinded by the darkness of tradition.

Today, then, in our experience, is a day for beholding the new thing that is, in fact happening. But more than that, it is a day for making a beginning in the difficult task of seeing and understanding the total significance of what is happening.

Let's be honest about the Ecumenical movement. It could not, and did not, originate in the mind of man. Our respective traditions are too comfortable for that. Even today, some of us have found it expedient and profitable to be anti-Catholic or anti-Protestant. In fact, the Churches most numerically successful today, at least on our side, seem to get that way by regularly berating the Ecumenical Movement. Can't we confess together today, that this new thing which has happened to us is of God?

A letter from the French Federation of Protestants to all the Protestant Churches in France contained this sentence which is most appropriate: "If the Lord is pleased to open the doors between the houses of his separated children, why should we be afraid to go through them?"* The doors between our separate houses have been flung open. Let us not hesitate to express humbly that the power to open those doors did not come from us; that in all candor, we would have been more comfortable with them tightly shut; that they were opened by God's Holy Spirit.

Christian Unity is of God, and because it is of God Unity in the Church is not an end in itself. The Ecumenical Movement is not the Mission of the Church, but a tool - a means to accomplish that Mission.

A group of North Americans, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, recently engaged in an intensive three day study of the theme - "How do we implement the Council?" The meeting was held in Rome. One of the significant understandings that came out of it was voiced by a priest in attendance: "Christian Unity is not a valid goal in itself. The calling of a Christian is to mission and service in the world. Unity will be given for the sake of mission."

We err, and err badly, when the Ecumenical movement becomes for us an end in itself. It is no panacea for our collective or individual difficulties. In fact, our task may become more difficult - and I am certain more uncomfortable - if we begin to see the ecumenical movement as something that is moving; a dynamic, living thing which is pushing us, not only together, but also out into the world.

It is a world that cannot be bothered with "Christian in-fighting"; a world grown cynical at the sinful competitiveness between the followers of Jesus. It is a world that needs to know the love and grace of God; a world badly in need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That Gospel is not fragmented; it comes to all men through the Church - as it faithfully serves its Lord. It is for this that we are concerned with Unity in the Church.

Again, we cannot create Christian Unity; only God can and will and is doing that. We can pray for it! We can serve it! Today we can behold it - a "New thing now springing forth."

Amen.